

The construction of outreach work in the context of local social policies towards the homeless in Antwerp (Belgium).

This contribution will mainly address the first issue within the stream ***At the edge of the welfare state: marginal populations as policy challenge***: “the position of individuals and groups who stay outside of the welfare including their legal status and their construction by policy makers, service providers and the public and/or evaluation of the moral challenges they form”. The focus in my research is the relationship between the concept “access” and “outreach work in the context of homelessness”. Outreach work towards the homeless is seen as part of a broader homeless strategy (Feantsa, 2010). The aim of outreach is closely related to improve the homeless their access to services, as they are often excluded from services, housing and other societal resources (Elissen et al., 2011; Olivet et al., 2010). Nevertheless, outreach cannot be detached from broader societal views on the role of the welfare state and social policy and as such, the same system that promotes outreach work as a strategy for inclusion and “calls for the protection of those who are excluded and repressed (human rights law) is responsible for exclusion (in terms of legal restrictions to access the welfare state) and repression (in terms of repressive legal responses to destitution and homelessness)” (Vonk 2014, 4). As such, both policies and practices towards the street homeless show ambivalence (Baillergeau, 2014). We express this ambivalence in our conceptualisation of outreach work, which is based on different understandings of the right to social welfare (Grymonprez et al., 2016). This conceptualisation differentiates between a minimalist and a maximalist understanding of the right to social welfare, which leads to different perspectives of (outreach) social work. As such, our minimalist-maximalist framework imposes new questions for the meaning and contribution of outreach work. How street homelessness is dealt with and how outreach is perceived as a solution for exclusion is highly contextual and reflects locally and historically embedded views on marginalization, homelessness and the role of social policy and social work.

This presentation is based on a case study in the context of outreach work to the homeless in the city of Antwerp, Belgium. The issues I will address are based on a quantitative analysis of 31 interviews with (former) experts and stakeholders in this

debate and analysis of documents in the field of practices and policies towards the homeless.

In this presentation, I will address (1) issues on the historical construction of the debate on accessibility of services for the homeless in Antwerp, (2) how this debate relates to our conceptual framework of different understandings of welfare rights and (3) relate this to the emergence and evolution of outreach work towards street homeless. The Belgian welfare state seems, as the stream proposal suggests, ineffective in providing a safety net and social inclusion for all. However, I will argue that both social policy and (outreach) social work play a role in limiting social interventions to a safety net or more generalized, 'residual practices'. Understanding the entwinement between social policy and social work, as my presentation aims, is essential to grab the limits of outreach social work, but also to reveal some possibilities to hold- on to a maximalist understanding of welfare rights and develop 'structural practices'.

References

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